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NARRATIVE OF A VOYAGE

IN

THE SHIP KENNERSLEY CASTLE,

FROM LEITH ROADS

TO

POYAIS;

WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE WORKMEN

ON THEIR ARRIVAL AT BLACK RIVER,

IN THAT TERRITORY,

AND

OF THEIR SUBSEQUENT REMOVAL TO

BELIZE.

BY

JAMES HASTIE, SAWYER.

Late Soldier in the 71st Regiment of Foot.

EDINBURGH:

PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR.

1823.

PREFACE.

The Author of the following Narrative, after having suffered much hardship and disappointment, together with the loss of two of his family, has once more reached his native country, and has had time to reflect coolly on what took place during this unfortunate voyage. He has drawn up, by the suggestion, and with the assistance of his friends, a plain statement of the occurrences which took place under his own immediate observation, in the hope of benefiting his family by the sale of this narrative.

He cannot say any thing of the interior of Poyais, not having been more than a few miles from the place where he and the other workmen were landed; but he is in every way ready to vouch for the accuracy of what he has stated, having been anxious to declare the truth, without concealing any circumstance which he thought worthy of being made public.

NARRATIVE

OF A

VOYAGE TO POYAIS, &c.

After longer detention than was at first expected, and being twice put back by stormy weather, the Kennersley Castle finally sailed from Leith Roads, with about 170 passengers, on the 22d January 1823.

Most of them were engaged to serve Sir Gregor M'Gregor for twelve months from the time of their arrival at Poyais, and to be supported by him during that period.

My own engagement was to have L.20 of wages the first year, and L.25 the second; and at my own earnest entreaty, I was allowed to take my wife and children with me, for whose passage L.30 was to be deducted by degrees from my wages. Other passengers who took out their families were agreed upon similar terms.

We knew that there was fully twelve months provisions, of beef, pork, flour, rice, oatmeal, pot-barley, &c. on board, besides clothing for those who might need; and also good English blankets, hair mattrasses,

and pillows, for bedding: tools of every kind were shipped for the workmen; and we saw that the bed places, and all other conveniences, in the ship, were fitted up in the most comfortable and substantial manner. The vessel was armed with guns (six and nine pounders), as also small arms, so that we had no fear of pirates.

Before we embarked, we had an interview with Sir Gregor at his house in Edinburgh, and he afterwards came to see us on board the ship in Leith Roads, when he not only inquired kindly after our accommodation, but on my speaking to him, he generously declared, that in consideration of our being the first ship from Scotland direct for Poyais, *all the women and children on board should have a free passage*, notwithstanding our agreement to pay for them, with which information we were well pleased; and when he left the ship, we gave him a salute of six guns and three cheers. Little did we anticipate the misfortunes which were afterwards to befall us; for which, however, so far as I can judge, he, as will afterwards appear, was not blameable.

Having got through the Pentland Frith with favourable weather, we passed St. Kilda on the 27th of January. From this period, until the 7th of March, when we made the island of Deseado, little occurred worth mentioning, except that we had some words at first with the captain, about giving the children a full supply of water, which he immediately complied with: also, one of the passengers having behaved badly to a girl on board, he was sentenced by his comrades to receive a flogging; but here we had the first instance of that want of judgment in the gentlemen who had charge of us, which was afterwards one cause of the

insubordination which in a great measure led to our misfortunes. This person having appealed against the sentence, and set us at defiance, the gentlemen had not the firmness to discourage the other bad characters, by seeing it put in execution.

On the 7th and 8th of March we passed and had a good view of Guadaloupe, Antigua, and Montserrat, on which last island some of the gentlemen landed ;—on the 9th and 10th we passed Porto Rico and San Domingo, and made Jamaica on the 14th by daylight. On the 18th we passed the Swan Islands, and made the promised land of Poyais on the 20th, after a voyage of fifty-seven days, during which time we had plenty of good provisions, and upon the whole were well used.

Before we left Edinburgh, we saw in the land-office there, and in a book which had been published some years ago by a Captain Strangeways, a small picture, which was said by the author to be a view of the Port of Black River (at which place we were to be landed) ; and in that print there was an appearance of some houses. But although the *Sugar-loaf hill*, in the interior, was something like that in the print, no houses were to be seen from the bar of the river ; but the country itself had a very beautiful appearance from the sea. It had somehow got afloat among us during the voyage, that we should find a town, with a good many inhabitants ; and in that belief we were confirmed by a young man, who was a cabin passenger, and who told us there was a government-house erected, and a theatre, of which he was going out to be the manager ! ! * We at all events were sure, that about sixty passengers,

* See copy of affidavit by the author and others, annexed.

under Governor Hall, had sailed from London some months before us, with tents, &c., and for the purpose of erecting habitations for themselves, and the other settlers who were to follow them. But when on the 22d of March we landed, we were very much disappointed to find no town, houses, nor people, except a part of the former settlers, some of them still in tents, and some in houses or huts, made of bamboo, and thatched with a kind of reeds; and that Governor Hall was absent, having gone to Cape Gracias-a-deos in search of the Captain of the Honduras Packet, who had basely run away with the rum, coffee, and medicine-chest sent out by that vessel; and it seems he was there selling these articles, as if they had been his own property.

The weather was at this time fine, and as we were all in good health, we soon got as much ground cleared as to erect our huts. I erected my hut beside an old mahogany tree, which was hollow in the middle, but which, if it had been sound, would have squared 24 inches.

It was laborious work getting the provisions, stores, and guns, over the bar of the river, which was, however, principally managed by the crew, and Indians who were hired for that purpose; but either from the carelessness of our officers, or some want of management, a part of the flour and rice was partially damaged with the salt water, which might surely have been avoided if more care had been taken. The salt provisions were however no worse.

The first thing done was to get a cellar dug, and a store-house erected, for the preservation of our provisions. It was, however, a very serious disappointment to find, as above stated, that there was no rum

for us, nor tea or coffee for the women; for want of which, particularly the former, many of the men mutinied at the very first, parading the settlement in the evening with a black flag, and doing nothing during the day but wandering in the woods, throwing themselves down and sleeping in the open air on the damp ground, the effects of which they soon felt. Great discontent began also to exist, in consequence of the former settlers being more favoured in their rations than us; but we comforted ourselves as well as we could, in the hope, that when Governor Hall arrived, he would keep some order and regularity, and that he would either bring back the Honduras Packet,* or some of the supplies which she had carried off.

When he did return, which was about fourteen days after we landed, he only brought back two puncheons of rum, which was scarcely a mouthful for us, although some spirit was absolutely necessary to correct the quality of the water, which we got out of the sand, the badness of which was one great cause of the sickness that afterwards took place.

The colonel told the men of the serious consequence which would likely happen, if they did not begin in earnest to prepare for the rainy season, which would soon commence; and most of them that would work (for many, from the very first, were both lazy and regardless), were principally employed either in erecting their huts, for which purpose there was plenty of materials at hand, or in clearing ground around them, or were sent in the morning in canoes or boats to the pine forest, about six miles off, to cut down and square tim-

* The Honduras Packet never came back; and we heard it said afterwards, that the captain had turned pirate,—but this was perhaps mere nonsense.

ber for the erection of more substantial houses. At that place there is very fine timber, many thousands of trees that would have squared 20 to 22 inches, and from 60 to 70, or even 90 feet in length, but so full of rosin, &c. that when we tried to flood them they sunk—an inconvenience easily remedied by bleeding or tapping the trees the season before cutting them; and this operation we performed on a great many. The flow from these trees, if saved, would have been valuable.

About this time Colonel Hall again went away to Cape Gracias-a-deos, leaving us still in a very discontented state; and owing to various causes, some of which have been stated, more than the climate, sickness now began to prevail, and in spite of every exhortation, some of the men would not exert themselves to get their huts made water-tight; so that, now when the rains did begin to come on through the night, the improvident were at times obliged to get up and sit with their blankets about them, or run to the tents for shelter.

No measures had been adopted by the governor or other officers to divide the men into sections or work parties, or to fix any of them on high dry ground before the rainy season set in, although the nearness of the sugar-loaf mountain was sufficient proof there were higher grounds at no great distance; neither did any attempt seem to be made to provide us with fish or fresh provisions, which might easily have been done by forming a hunting party of some of the best shots among the men, and making it their duty to procure game, such as wild pigs, turkeys, parrots, &c. of which there were plenty in the woods. When the gentlemen went up the river to shoot for amusement, they were always successful in getting quams, ducks, or other

fowls ;—in the river and lagoons there was abundance of fish, and at first there was a large net to catch them ; but this net some of our wise officers got out a few days after our arrival, and contrived to get it torn to pieces upon the stumps and roots of float-wood in the river, instead of hauling at a clear place or sandy beach.

About this period, before the governor went away, seeing nothing but confusion before us, I begged very hard that my companion, Malcolm M'Dougal, and I, might be allowed to erect our huts on the pine ridge beside our saw-pits, and take our families there ; and that, as we were both old soldiers, we might be allowed two or three muskets and a little ammunition, by which means we could easily have supplied ourselves in the moonlight nights with as much game as would have served our families, and perhaps kept off that sickness which afterwards assailed us. This, however, the colonel, whatever might be his motives, positively refused to allow ; and although many old soldiers amongst us were fully aware of the necessity and importance of order, yet as the governor did not seem inclined to divide the men into sections or working parties, but appeared more taken up with journeys to the Cape, (for what reason we could not understand) and as the other managers did not attempt any measure of the kind, it was in vain for us to speak.

It seemed to be the will of Providence that every circumstance should combine for our destruction.

At the end of the first month from the time of our arrival, when we asked the governor for our wages, he told us he had nothing but paper to give us, which was another pretence for discontent and continued mutiny. But as the Skeen was now daily looked for

to bring us relief, and as many of the men, myself amongst the rest, had received advances from Sir Gregor to account of our wages, and the whole of our families having had free passages, want of money might have been overlooked for a month or so, even although we knew that the colonel had brought some money from England, and had made advances to the people who came with him, if other things had been right. But sickness and despondency had begun to spread;—the bad characters amongst us not having been kept in check by their superiors, a general mutiny and determination neither to work nor let others work began to prevail. The medicine-chest was said to have run dry, although since I came home I found by inquiring at the druggists, that a full supply for 300 men for twelve months had been sent out with us. What became of these, and the cordials, and preserved provision for the sick, Dr. Smith can perhaps tell; none of them, so far as I know, were given to the men, except a few dozes of salts, and similar medicine. Dr. Douglas' conduct was uniformly kind and attentive.

About the middle and end of April, sickness and despondency was so general, that few were able or willing to make any exertion; and I am sorry to have to add, that many of those who were still well, plundered instead of assisted their sick brethren, and likewise plundered the public stores of any thing they could conveniently lay their hands upon.

The whole deaths, however, at this time, and during *our whole stay at Poyais*, was three children (one of them my own) and five men, besides one who in a state of derangement shot himself. He had, I understand, been sometimes rather *touched* before he left Edin-

burgh, where he has a widow and children. The whole number sick, when they embarked for Belize, did not exceed 30 or 40 persons.

Near the middle of May, and during the absence of Colonel Hall, the schooner, Mexican Eagle, came from Belize, with presents, as we understood, for the Mosquito king. Mr. Marshal Bennet, the chief magistrate and principal merchant at Belize, and Mr. Westby his clerk, came ashore, and after conversing with some of us, told us, that as we had not got our wages we were free men, and might do as we thought proper; and that all of us, tradesmen especially, who chose to go with him to Belize, he would ensure us of plenty of work, and much better wages than we were *promised* here; but that if we staid where we were, we would be sure to die. Several days after this, Colonel Hall, with the Mosquito king, and some old men whom he called his counsellors, arrived, and after some consultation with Mr. Bennet and the colonel, the king told us that he had revoked his grant to Sir Gregor, and that we must either take an oath of allegiance to him or leave the country; failing which, he would bring down a strong force and massacre every man of us. The colonel told us he could not sanction our going away, but he gave us no encouragement to stay —we might follow our own inclinations; and under these circumstances, seeing that it was the determination of all parties to break up the settlement at all hazards, I had no alternative but to do as others did. And in the hope of being better off at Balize, I embarked in the above schooner with about 60 others, little dreaming that my miseries were in a manner only beginning.

Before going farther, it may be expected that I

should say something of the country, so far as I saw it; but having been confined to within a few miles of the place where our habitations were fixed, my observations were of course limited. The place where we were stationed had formerly been the principal town of the old English settlers before they were ordered away by our government. In digging foundations for our huts we found bricks, lime, and other remains of houses; and there had evidently been a very large fort, the ditch and ramparts of which were quite easily seen, and could easily be cleared out, although overgrown with brushwood. The whole country and river banks, so far as we could see, were covered with trees and brushwood, and the creeping underwood so thick, that a person required to cut his way through it. We could see no distance round us for wood, or know what kind of timber was in the interior. Mr. Booth, the surveyor, saw some fine mahogany a long way up; and by the old mahogany tree above mentioned, it is probable there might be others at no great distance. I saw two or three very fine logs which Mr. Murray, one of the American settlers, had got down the river; and he and his companion, Mr. Windship, told me and Malcolm M'Dougal that they could get fine cedar also; and indeed we had promised to engage to work wholly to them, and to cut up mahogany at odd hours. The new settlers who had been up the river told us, however, they had not seen any mahogany where they were.

I have already said what noble timber there was at the pine ridge; and there was at other places a great number of various kinds of trees, shrubs, and plants, with which I was not acquainted, never having seen some of the kinds before.

As for the natives, we saw nothing but the height of civility of them. They frequently visited the settlement, and brought us bananas, plantains, and other fruit and vegetables, in exchange for old clothes, or any thing else we had to spare. If we had had articles fit for barter, such as coarse red cloth, coarse knives, and various other trifles, to ensure the natives a regular market, I have no doubt they would have brought us constant supplies of cattle and provisions of every kind. Although they are nearly naked, they seemed a very peaceable, modest, quiet race, especially the Poyers, and those that came down the river; but the Samboos along the coast are said to be in general great rascals. Be this as it may, I question very much if the king could have got a sufficient number to join him to put his threats in execution; at least I would not have been afraid of all he could do, if I had been one of fifty or sixty resolute men, with muskets in our hands.

Although we were a good deal plagued with mosquitoes and sand-flies, and although some few of the lads, who were so imprudent as to go barefoot, were plagued with chiggers about their toes, they did no great mischief. One of the lads was stung in the thigh by a scorpion; but Dr. Douglas cut round the place, and it was quite heal in about eight days.

We had no annoyance from wild beasts or snakes. Several of the latter were killed in the wood without doing any of us harm, as well as some tiger cats, the skins of which were kept by the officers, being very beautiful, and worth money. The alligators, of which there were several in the river, used at first to come pretty near the huts; but they soon began to keep at a respectable distance, and were considered rather harmless creatures. For instance, although the body

of a man, who was drowned when amusing himself in a canoe, remained in the water nearly twenty-four hours, it was taken out quite untouched by them.

I think it should have been evident to our governor, that the place where we were fixed, although it might be very well for a fort and landing-place, was neither a healthy nor a good place for a final settlement, both owing to the lowness of the situation and the soil, which was mere sand, unfit for raising vegetables or pot herbs for the settlers: and although some radishes and such like things grew down about the water side, every thing in general was burnt up when it came above the sand. Had we been on higher land a little farther up the river, where the soil was good, things might have been very different; and even at the pine ridge both soil and water were better. The two Americans already mentioned had been settled within a little distance of where we were stationed upwards of two years, and had not only plenty of vegetables, fowls, &c. but also a considerable piece of ground laid out in sugar canes;—they had also enjoyed good health, so far as we heard. And, in short, if things had been properly managed by our officers, we might have been comfortable enough, and doing well for our families; but our rulers never seemed hearty in the cause, or to go about it properly, and it seemed as if they had some separate affairs of their own to manage. I do not wish to say any thing rashly; but instead of attending to make us comfortable, it seemed as if every one was for his own hand;—even the boards and timber used for fitting up our births in the ship were mostly sold, or delivered by Mr. Goucher to Messrs Murray and Windship, instead of being, as was intended, put under our mattrasses as bedsteads and bot-

toms, to prevent the injurious effects of the evaporation from the sandy floors. Whether they acted fairly by us, or according to Sir Gregor's intentions, they will surely have to explain.*

Even at this stage of the business, if we had been moved to higher ground, or even remained where we were, and cordials and medicines been sent to us from Belize, I have no doubt whatever that the lives of a great many people would have been saved,† who afterwards miserably perished in the hospitals of Belize, which are completely surrounded by stagnant water, emitting every morning, before the sea breeze springs up, a most pestilential smell. It is evident, however, that the determination of all parties in authority was to break up the settlement, and carry off the stores, at all hazards.

To proceed, however, with my story. Our miserable state, crowded into a small schooner, and obliged mostly to keep the deck, under a burning sun by day, and heavy rains by night, at the most unhealthy season of the year, may be more easily conceived than described. We were three days and nights in this state; and although plenty of provisions were taken from the stores for our use, we had no room or convenience for cooking, and were therefore obliged to be content without almost any sustenance. When there-

* See affidavit annexed. There was of course some exceptions: Mr. Archibald Handyside's activity and good conduct gained him the good will of all. He, like many others, escaped sickness until his arrival at Belize, where he died.

† For instance, my companion Malcolm M'Dougal, who was so bad he could not be moved when I sailed from Poyais, had recovered when the schooner returned there from Belize. He afterwards died at Belize. Others were similarly situated.

fore we arrived at Belize, we were so exhausted and ill, that most of us had to be carried or supported to the hospital, where, however, every attention was shewn to us by the inhabitants, particularly Mr. and Mrs. Westby, whose kindness I shall never forget. We were at first supplied with wine and cordials: but the unhealthiness of the place, which I consider decidedly worse than Poyais, the crowded state of the hospitals, particularly when the schooner brought up the second cargo, who had a longer passage than the first, so much increased our complaints, as to baffle in many instances the power of medicine; and many were weekly carried off to their graves. Many also, who had never been particularly affected, or were getting better, lost their lives by making too free with the new rum. Among the first who died in the hospital, was another of my poor children, although every thing in our power at the time was done for her.

The schooner having made a third voyage, now brought away the remainder of the stores and provisions; and, with the exception of what flour, rice, and oatmeal, was issued to us in the hospital, I believe the whole, including beef, flour, rice, and other provisions, tools, school-books, printing presses, and every thing else, were sold by auction for what they could fetch.

Of course, Sir Gregor knew nothing of what was going on, and at Belize we were told he had absconded—that he had intended nothing else but to destroy us; and, in short, every species of abuse was uttered against him by the Belize merchants, who seemed to be his decided enemies, and very much against his forming any settlement at Black River.

Although both myself, wife, and remaining child, still laboured under very severe fever and ague, we at

last heard that we were to be sent home in the Ocean, Captain Whittle, to whose kind and fatherly care I attribute, under Divine Providence, the saving of my own life, and the lives of my remaining family. If we had been his own near relations, that *good man* could not have been more kind to us. May God reward him! All the passengers home were not so fortunate. Some of them died during the voyage, and others complain that they were knocked about in a very unfeeling manner.

We embarked at Belize on the first of August, and arrived in London on the 13th of October. Being sent for by the Lord Mayor, we found at the mansion-house Mr. Prince, who I believe is somehow connected with Mr. Bennet of Belize, or his brother. A number of questions were asked us there, whether with a view of attracting the charitable attention of the public, or of implicating Sir Gregor, it is not for me to say; but we found the benefit of Mr. Prince's interference, by a subscription being raised for us. We were got into St. Thomas's Hospital; and the Scottish Society having kindly provided a passage home for us in one of the smacks, we arrived at Leith about the end of October. Since which we have received L. 5 each, being the sum subscribed for us in London.

We experienced great attention and assistance from Sir Gregor's agent in London, he himself being in Paris.

When before the Lord Mayor, I was shaking so much with the remains of the fever and ague, that I could scarcely stand, or know the meaning of much that was said; and I told his lordship I might make some mistakes, but none willingly. To the surprise of myself and the other men who appeared at the same

time, we afterwards saw statements in the public papers as coming from us which none of us had ever uttered, and which we found incumbent upon us to contradict upon oath by making the affidavit, of which a copy is subjoined.

Having thus finished a narrative of my unfortunate voyage, I may have made some omissions, but I am not conscious of having stated any thing but the truth.

I have returned to the service of my old master, and I will not again be among the first to venture to a new colony, unless I know better who is to have the charge. For to the want of management in our governors, and not to the climate, or Sir Gregor M'Gregor, do I attribute the misfortunes which befel us.

FINIS.

AFFIDAVIT.

London, 22d October 1823.

We the undersigned emigrants to Poyais, and lately arrived from Belize, take our most solemn oath to the following, viz. James Hastie, James Thompson, Thomas Burgess, William Mitchell, Archibald Torry, and Gregor Geddes,—

"That it is true that they were at the mansion-house on Friday last, and not since, and made a statement before the Lord Mayor; but the statements published in the newspapers of Saturday last and Tuesday under the mansion-house reports, is not the statements that they made, but are false and unfounded in the greater part; and they feel themselves dissatisfied that any man should publish words as coming from them that they never spoke. Especially that part of the report which states that Sir Gregor M'Gregor took money from us, it is false and unfounded; on the contrary, we ourselves received money, with many others, from Sir Gregor M'Gregor. We had our passage free, as well as that for our wives and families, although it was at first understood that we were to pay for the same.

"We voluntarily swear that Sir Gregor M'Gregor never told us, nor did his agents in Scotland, that we should find a theatre at San Joseph, nor a government house; but a young man named Picken, who after-

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wards made an affidavit at Belize, it was he that told us these falsehoods in our passage out in the Kennersley Castle, and in Leith Roads.

" We likewise swear and make known to the public, that from the best of our judgment we believe that Sir Gregor M'Gregor has been worse used by Colonel Hall and his other agents than was ever man before; and that had they have done their duty by Sir Gregor and by us, things would have turned out very differently at Poyais, and we should have been now there doing well for ourselves, instead of being in England without a shilling to support us.

" And we further declare, that the first cause of discontent amongst the emigrants by the Kennersley Castle, was in consequence of the acting governor making a difference in the rations in favour of the emigrants by the Honduras Packet.

" We declare that it is our true belief, that had Sir Gregor gone out himself, or if he had sent honest men there for managers, that the settlement would have gone on very differently from what it did. And I William Mitchell myself carred six bales of cloth sold by Colonel Hall to a Mr. Murray, and the rum and pork was likewise sold by the other officers."

JAMES HASTIE.
GREGORY GEDDES.
WILLIAM MITCHELL.
THOMAS BURGES.
his
JAMES X THOMSON.
mark.
ARCHIBALD TORRY.

Sworn before me at the Mansion-House,
22d October 1823,
W. HEYGATE, Mayor.